



SSG Andress Simmons, an Army instructor at the Louis F. Garland Fire Academy, motions two students to a better position from which to attack the flames engulfing a simulated UH-60 helicopter.

Story and Photos by Steve Harding

# FIREFIGHTER UNIVERSITY



Students in Block 4 attack a fire in the kitchen of the academy's "3-2-1" trainer, a fireproof three-story building that also includes bedrooms and living areas.

## FIREFIGHTER UNIVERSITY

**T**HE two young firefighters weren't doing well. Encumbered by protective gear and pummeled by waves of searing heat from the burning Black Hawk, they couldn't seem to get their hose into the right position to attack the flames engulfing the helicopter. Just as they were about to retreat, SSG Andreas

Simmons calmly motioned them to a better position, and within moments they'd beaten the fire into submission. Simmons and his fellow instructors at the Louis F. Garland Fire Academy know firsthand how daunting and demanding firefighting can be, and they do all they can to pass on their collective knowledge to the soldiers and other service members who attend

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the state-of-the-art school.

### A Joint Effort

Located on its own large compound at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, the academy uses 46 classrooms, 58 vehicles and a range of other training aids to produce firefighters for all of the U.S. military services.

"Firefighting crosses military boundaries," said Air Force Lt. Col. Patrick J. Smith, commander of Goodfellow's 312th Training Squadron and the academy's supervisor. "Each service has common concerns in terms of structural, vehicle and aircraft fires, so firefighting is a perfect skill to be taught in a joint-services academy."

"By having soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and Coast Guard members all go through here together," he said, "we're also able to make better use of our resources and ensure the same level of expertise across all the services."

"Firefighting is a team effort,"

added MSG Buddy Glover, the facility's senior Army instructor, "whether you do it in the military or as a civilian. No one works alone, and that teamwork is obvious here at the academy. Students have instructors from all four of the services, and all of the instructors teach the same material from the same lesson plans."

"The sort of integrated and comprehensive training we offer here has become especially important since the tragic events of Sept. 11," Smith said, "because the terrorist attacks and their aftermath underscored the value of well-trained and well-equipped emergency services within the Department of Defense. Since the attacks we've been getting calls from military and civilian organizations throughout the nation asking about ways in which

the academy's staff might be able to share their knowledge.

"There's a very strong awareness that firefighters are critical to homeland defense and installation preparedness," Smith said. "And all of the services are dedicating a lot more effort and a lot more money to ensuring they have the right resources and the right number of people to respond to any possible situation. We're doing all we can to ensure that our firefighters have the skills that will keep them from getting hurt and allow them to respond intelligently and efficiently."

### Learning the Skills

Though the Louis F. Garland Fire



(Above) Block 4 students prepare for a stint in the school's "3-2-1" trainer, whose intricate piping system can produce controlled flames at the flick of a switch.



(Left) The state-of-the-art academy produces about 1,500 new military firefighters each year.

Academy offers experienced firefighters the chance to train in such things as fire inspection and advanced technical rescue, about half of the 3,000 personnel who went through the school in fiscal year 2001 were there to pick up the basic skills of the trade. These are taught in the 66-day Apprentice Course, which Glover called the “foundation upon which all a firefighter’s advanced skills are built.”

This basic firefighter course is divided into seven blocks of instruction — six that are common to all students (listed below) and a seventh, deployment-related block for Air Force personnel only.

**T**aken as a whole, Glover said, the Apprentice Course is a challenging and comprehensive introduction to the range of skills the new firefighters will need in the field.

“The course is really well put together,” Glover said, “and we couldn’t ask for a better place to train firefighters. So any problems that arise are usually not because of a student’s dedication to being a



Though not as physically imposing as some of the academy’s other students, PFC Leah Brooks typifies the dedication and “heart” all firefighters need.

firefighter; they usually grow out of the individual’s dedication to being a service member.”

## Soldiers, Then Firefighters

In the case of the approximately 175 active and reserve-component Army personnel who attend the academy each year, dedication to being service members means remem-



The camera’s flash lights the interior of a long, obstacle-packed confined-spaces trainer that students normally negotiate in total darkness.

## Six instruction blocks are common to all students.

1 and 2

The students’ first exposure to their new career field comes during the 12 academic days devoted to **Blocks 1 and 2**, during which instructors cover such basics as building codes, structure types, alarm systems, fire behavior, CPR, rescue breathing and first aid.

3

In **Block 3** the students are introduced to the physical side of firefighting and the tools of the trade: ladders, axes, ropes and, of course, fire trucks. Practical exercises in the academy’s sprawling outdoor training area involve such things as learning how to evacuate people from smoke-filled buildings, and how to physically haul unconscious or injured people to safety.

4

It’s in **Block 4** that the fledgling firefighters first confront fire, “the beast,” by tackling it head-on in the academy’s “3-2-1” trainer. This fireproof, three-story building includes kitchens, bedrooms and living areas, and is fitted with an intricate system of piping that can produce controlled flames at the flick of a switch.

In this block the students also learn the often exhausting art of laying and retrieving hoses, a task that many of them find to be the academy’s most physically challenging.

5

From the 3-2-1 trainer the students move back to the classroom for **Block 5**, which teaches them how to recognize and deal with the range of hazardous materials firefighters can encounter. This block culminates with practical lessons in the specialized skills of “HAZMAT” firefighting, which are taught using another of the academy’s highly realistic outdoor simulators.

6

**Block 6**, the final course of instruction for all but the Air Force students in the apprentice course, covers airport firefighting and is perhaps the most intense instruction the students undergo.

This block starts with three days of classroom work, after which students move to the outside training area to operate the specialized vehicles used to fight aircraft fires. They also learn how to fight fuel fires using foam, and how to extract crewmembers from helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. They put the new skills to the test fighting controlled fires set in highly realistic helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft simulators.





**Block 3 students practice removing an "unconscious casualty" from the top of a building.**

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bering they are soldiers first. "We make up a fairly small group here at what we like to call 'Fort Goodfellow,' since the only other soldiers on the base attend the Air Force-run intelligence school," Glover said. "So helping these young people become outstanding soldiers is just as important to us as helping them become outstanding firefighters. They're still young, in terms of being

both firefighters and soldiers, and we mentor them in both areas."

While the fire academy's 19 Army instructors are assigned to the Engineer School at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., they, like the academy's Army students, are attached to the Goodfellow-based 344th Military Intelligence Battalion for admin purposes. And it's in the battalion's Company B that the Army students get much of the mentoring they need.

"The company has two very fine drill sergeants, both of whom are MOS 51M firefighters, and they're the ones who handle the students outside the class," Glover said. "The drill sergeants get a lot of 'face time' with the students, and they do much of the mentoring in terms of the students' soldier skills. They're the ones who deal with problem issues that the instructors may not catch."

"A lot of these students are young and impressionable, so it's up to us to give them the right impression about what the Army is and what the 51M MOS is all about," said SSG Angel Espinoza, one of the drill sergeants. "These students come straight from BCT, and we tell them: 'Look, this is going to be hard, but you can do it.'"

"Doing it" takes more than a little effort, Espinoza said.

"Their days are long. We usually wake them up at 0400 and we often don't release them until 1700, because there is Army-mandated training that we have to accomplish after they're done at the fire academy," he said. "This is a tough line of work and we're a small MOS. So the teamwork, self-discipline and confidence we try to teach them are important."

Equally important, said instructor SSG Thomas Wood, are dedication and "heart."

"The first thing you notice about the students who come here is that they really want to be firefighters," Wood said. "And they need that dedication to be able to deal with all the challenges they face. Not just the academic ones, either. This is a physically challenging line of work, and you really have to want to succeed."

"Not all firefighters are 6'2", 210 pounds and strong as an ox," Glover added. "And that's where the heart comes in. We have seen soldiers come



**(Above) This blazing large-aircraft simulator is one of several extremely realistic training tools students encounter in Block 6.**

**(Right) In Block 6 students also learn to extract crewmembers from fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, including this retired but structurally intact CH-53.**



through here that were 5'2" and 100 pounds and logically shouldn't have been able to handle the physical challenges. But because of their heart and determination, they overcame those challenges. That's the sort of determination we're looking for."

And it's the kind of determination that PFC Leah Brooks, at about 5'1" easily one of the academy's less ox-like students, said the academy helped her discover in herself.

"Being a firefighter is something I've always wanted to do," she said. "I'm not real big, though, so it's been kind of hard for me. But I've learned a lot from the instructors and the drill sergeants, and I've learned a lot about what I'm capable of doing."

"Making it through this academy is an accomplishment that every graduate should be very proud of, and it prepares people to join a very special and very honorable profession," Glover said. "This is the best fire academy in the world, and if you want to be a firefighter, this is the place to come." □

For more on the Louis F. Garland Fire Academy and its programs, visit [www.goodfellow.af.mil/~trs312/newfire/index.htm](http://www.goodfellow.af.mil/~trs312/newfire/index.htm).